

RELIGION IN A SCIENTIFIC AGE

By Ven. Dr. K. Sri Dhammananda



oday we live in a scientific age in which almost every aspect of our lives has been affected by science. Since the scientific revolution during the seventeenth century, science has continued to exert tremendous influence on what we think and do.

The *impact of science* has been particularly strong on traditional religious beliefs. Many basic religious concepts are crumbling under the pressure of modern science and are no longer acceptable to the intellectual and the well-informed man. It is no longer possible to assert truth derived merely through theological speculations or based on the authority of religious scriptures in isolation to scientific consideration. For example, the findings of modern psychologists indicate that the human mind, like the physical body, work according to natural, causal laws without the presence of

an unchanging soul as taught by some religions.

Some religionists choose to disregard scientific discoveries which conflict with their religious dogmas. Such rigid mental habits are indeed a hindrance to human progress. Since the modern man refuses to believe anything blindly, even though it had been traditionally accepted, such religionists will only succeed in increasing the ranks of non-believers' with their faulty theories.

On the other hand, some religionists have found it necessary to accommodate popularly accepted scientific theories by giving new interpretations to their religious beliefs. A case in point is Darwin's Theory of Evolution. Many religionists maintain that man was directly created by God. Darwin, on the other hand, claimed that man had evolved from the ape, a theory which upset the doctrines of divine creation and the fall of man. Since all enlightened thinkers have accepted Darwin's theory, the theologians today have little choice except to give a new interpretation to their doctrines to suit this theory which they had opposed for so long.

In the light of modern scientific discoveries, it is not difficult to understand that many of the views held in many religions regarding the universe and life are merely conventional thoughts of that which have been long superseded. It is generally true to say that religions have greatly contributed to human development and progress. They have laid down values and standards and formulated principles to guide human life. But for all the

good they have done, religions can no longer survive in the modern scientific age if the followers insist on imprisoning truth into set forms and dogmas, on encouraging rituals and some other practices which have been depleted of their original meaning.

Buddhism and Science

Until the beginning of the last century, Buddhism was confined to countries untouched by modern science. Nevertheless, from its very beginning, the Teachings of the Buddha were always open to scientific thinking.

One reason why the Teaching can easily be embraced by the scientific spirit is that the Buddha never encouraged rigid, dogmatic belief. He did not claim to base His Teachings on faith, belief, or divine revelation, but allowed great flexibility and freedom of thought.

The second reason is that the scientific spirit can be found in the Buddha's approach to universal Truth. The Buddha's method for discovering and testing the Truth is very similar to that of the scientist. A scientist observes the external world objectively, and would only establish a scientific theory after conducting many successful practical experiments.

Using a similar approach 25 centuries ago, the Buddha observed the inner world with detachment, and encouraged His disciples not to accept any teaching until they had critically investigated and personally verified its reality. Just as the scientist today would not claim that his experiment cannot be duplicated by others, the

Buddha did not claim that His experience of Enlightenment was exclusively to Him. Thus, in His approach to Truth, the Buddha was as analytical as the present day scientist. He established a practical, scientifically worked-out method for reaching the Ultimate Truth and the experience of Enlightenment.

While Buddhism is very much in line with the scientific spirit, it is *not correct to equate* Buddhism with science. It is true that the practical applications of science have enabled mankind to live more comfortable lives and experience wonderful things undreamed of before. Science has made it possible for man to swim better than the fishes, fly higher than the birds, and walk on the moon. Yet the sphere of knowledge acceptable to conventional, scientific wisdom is confined to empirical evidence. And scientific truth is subject to constant change. Science cannot give man control over his mind and neither does it offer moral control and the aim of life. Despite its wonders, science has indeed many limitations where Buddhism has gone beyond that.

Limitations of Science

Often one hears so much about science and what it can do, and so little about what it cannot do. Scientific knowledge is *limited* to the data received through the sense organs. It does not recognise reality which transcends sense-data. Scientific truth is built upon logical observations of sense-data which are continually changing. Scientific truth is, therefore, relative truth not

intended to stand the test of time. And a scientist, being aware of this fact, is always willing to discard a theory if it can be replaced by a better one.

Science attempts to understand the outer world and has barely scratched the surface of man's inner world. Even the science of psychology has not really fathomed the underlying cause of man's mental unrest. When a man is frustrated and disgusted with life, and his inner world is filled with disturbances and unrest, science today is very much un equipped to help him. The social sciences which cater for man's environment may bring him a certain degree of happiness. But unlike an animal, man requires more than mere physical comfort and needs help to cope with his frustrations and miseries arising from his daily experiences.

Today so many people are plagued with fear, restlessness, and insecurity. Yet science fails to succour them. Science is unable to teach the common man to control his mind when he is driven by the animal nature that burns within him.

Can science make man better? If it can, why do violent acts and immoral practices abound in countries which are so advanced in science? Isn't it fair to say that despite all the scientific progress achieved and the advantages conferred on man, science leaves the inner man basically unchanged: it has only heightened man's feelings of dependence and insufficiency? In addition to its failure to bring security to mankind, science has also made everyone feel even more insecure by threatening

the world with the possibility of wholesale destruction.

Science is *unable* to provide a meaningful purpose of life. It cannot provide man clear reasons for living. In fact, science is thoroughly secular in nature and unconcerned with man's spiritual goal. The materialism inherent in scientific thought denies the psyche goals higher than material satisfaction. By its selective theorizing and relative truths, science disregards some of the most essential issues and leaves many questions unanswered. For instance, when asked why physical and mental inequalities exist among men, no scientific explanation can be given to such questions which are beyond its narrow confines.

Learned Ignorance

The transcendental mind developed by the Buddha is not limited to sense-data and goes beyond the logic trapped within the limitation of relative perception. The human intellect, on the contrary, operates on the basis of information it collects and stores, whether in the field of religion, philosophy, science or art. The information for the mind is gathered through our sense organs which are inferior in so many ways. The very limited information perceived makes our understanding of the world distorted. In his book, *Learned Ignorance*, a French scholar by the name of Nicholas of Cusa observed:

“All our much vaunted knowledge based on our senses is really ignorance, and true knowledge is only obtained by shedding all this until we think

without using sense ideas.”

“Truth does not depend on matters outside ourselves but within us. We cannot hope to find Truth by experiment and sense-perception or even by logic and reason. These are instruments to gain knowledge but not the Truth. Truth must come from inner realization. Books can only stimulate thoughts and give you knowledge. For Truth you must turn your eyes inwards for it is within you. Therefore, the search for knowledge is one thing, and the search for Truth is another thing.”

“Words are the products of our finite minds and our minds depend for all their knowledge on the experience of our senses. These senses are sometimes not reliable; one incident that has been seen by many people may be explained in different ways.”

Some people are proud of the fact that they know so much. In fact, the less we know, the more certain we are in our explanations; the more we know, the more we realize our limitations.

A brilliant scholar once wrote a book which he considered as the ultimate work. He felt that the book contained all the literary gems and philosophies. Being proud of his achievement, he showed his masterpiece to a colleague of his who was equally brilliant with the request that the book be reviewed by him. Instead, his colleague asked the author to write down on a piece of

paper all he knew and all he did not know. The author sat down deep in thought, but after a long while failed to write down anything he knew. Then he turned his mind to the second question, and again he failed to write down anything he did not know. Finally, with his ego at the lowest ebb, he gave up, realizing that all that he knew was really ignorance.

In this regard, Socrates, the well-known Athenian philosopher of the Ancient World, had this to say when asked what he knew: *"I know only one thing – that I do not know"*.

Beyond Science

Buddhism goes beyond modern science in its acceptance of a wider field of knowledge than is allowed by the scientific mind. Buddhism admits knowledge arising from the sense organs as well as personal experiences gained through mental culture. By training and developing a highly concentrated mind, religious experience can be understood and verified. Religious experience is not something which can be understood by conducting experiments in a test-tube or examined under a microscope.

The truth discovered by science is relative and subject to changes, while that found by the Buddha is final and absolute: the Truth of Dhamma does not change according to time and space. Furthermore, in contrast to the selective theorizing of science, the Buddha encouraged the wise not to cling to theories, scientific or

otherwise. Instead of theorizing, the Buddha taught mankind how to live a righteous life, by calming the senses, and by casting off desires, the Buddha pointed the way through which we can discover within ourselves the nature of life. And the real purpose of life can be found.

Practice is important in Buddhism. A person who studies much but does not practise is like one who is able to recite recipes from a huge cookery book without trying to prepare a single dish. His hunger cannot be relieved by book knowledge alone. Practice is such an important prerequisite of enlightenment that in some schools of Buddhism, such as Zen, practice is put even ahead of knowledge.

The scientific method is outwardly directed, and modern scientists exploit nature and the elements for their own comfort, often disregarding the need to harmonise with the environment and thereby polluting the world. In contrast, Buddhism is inwardly directed and is concerned with the inner development of man. On the lower level, Buddhism teaches the individual how to adjust and cope with events and circumstances of daily life. At the higher level, it represents the human endeavour to grow beyond oneself through the practice of mental culture or mind development.

Buddhism has a complete system of mental culture concerned with gaining insight into the nature of things which leads to complete self-realization of the Ultimate Truth – Nibbana. This system is both practical and

scientific; it involves dispassionate observation of emotional and mental states. More like a scientist than a judge, a meditator observes the inner world with mindfulness.

Science without Religion

Without having moral ideals, science poses a *danger to all mankind*. Science has made the machine which in turn becomes king. The bullet and bomb are gifts of science to the few in power on whom the destiny of the world depends. Meanwhile the rest of mankind waits in anguish and fear, not knowing when the nuclear weapons, the poisonous gases, the deadly arms – all fruits of scientific research designed to kill efficiently – will be used on them. Not only is science completely unable to provide moral guidance to mankind, it has also fed fuel to the flame of human craving.

Science devoid of morality spells only destruction: it becomes the draconian monster man discovered. And unfortunately, this very monster is becoming more powerful than man himself. Unless man learns to restrain and govern the monster through the practice of religious morality, the monster will soon overpower him. Without religious guidance, science threatens the world with destruction. In contrast, science when coupled with a religion like Buddhism can transform this world into a haven of peace, security and happiness.

Never was there a time when the co-operation between science and religion is so desperately needed in

the best interest and service of mankind. Religion without science is blind, while science without religion is crippled.

Tribute to Buddhism

The wisdom of Buddhism founded on compassion has the vital role of correcting the dangerous destination modern science is heading for. Buddhism can provide the spiritual leadership to guide scientific research and invention in promoting a brilliant culture of the future. Buddhism can provide worthy goals for scientific advancement which is presently facing a hopeless impasse of being enslaved by its very inventions.

Albert Einstein paid a tribute to Buddhism when he said, "If there is any religion that would cope with modern scientific needs, it would be Buddhism". Buddhism requires no revision to keep it 'up to date' with recent scientific findings. Buddhism need not surrender its views to science because it embraces science as well as going beyond science. Buddhism is the bridge between religious and scientific thoughts by stimulating man to discover the latent potentialities within himself and his environment. *Buddhism is timeless!* ■